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ABSTRACT

The National Centre for Research on Rural Education (NCRRE), located at the University of Western Australia, was established in November 1980, to undertake research on educational problems in rural Australia, which include isolation, cultural heterogeneity and underdevelopment, insufficient resources, technical inadequacies, and economic deficiencies, affecting a rural school-age population of 451,000. Plans to establish NCRRE evolved from discussion and conclusions at a national conference on rural education held in Perth in November 1979. Pedagogical, economic, social, geographic, and demographic factors insofar as they bear on education in rural Australia are the objects of the Centre's interests. In addition to research on major issues and problems in rural education, the work of NCRRE is expected to include several other activities that may lead to improved rural education, including sponsorship of seminars, symposia, and conferences; development of a base for cooperative efforts and the exchange of ideas; operation of a clearinghouse for gathering and disseminating information; publication and dissemination of research results; and support of in-service actitities. A Board of Management with nationwide representation gives the Centre policy direction. Centre personnel are staff members of the University's Department of Education; the director reports to the head of the Department of Education. (CM)

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THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON RURAL EDUCATION

RURAL EDUCATION: A NEW RESEARCH CENTRE LOOKS AT SOME PERENNIAL PROBLEMS

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by

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The University of Western Australia

March, 1981.

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Rural Education: A New Research Centre Looks At Some Perennial Problems

During a period of constricting financial resources for research in education, declining school enrolment and guarded responses by political bodies when new schemes for education are proposed may hardly seem to be an opportune time to launch a new education research centre. But the need for research on education in rural Australia may justify an exception. Problems of education associated with isolation, cultural heterogeneity and underdevelopment, insufficient resources, technological inadequacies and economic deficiencies in some rural areas of the country, suggest a compelling need to initiate new research efforts on rural education. Numerous factors that bear on rural education, such as geographic vastness, low population density, extraordinary costs of delivery of educational services, inadequate political influence and uncertain education goals create problems of the most vexing kind for education practitioners and consumers alike, regardless of the specific rural area of Australia under consideration. The National Centre for Research on Rural Education (NCRRE), located on the campus of the University of Western Australia, was established in November, 1980 to undertake research on these and related problems.

Australians, in the main, comprise an urban society. Of the more than 14 million people who live in Australia, approximately eighty-five per cent dwell in cities. In 1978 the school-age population numbered 3.01

million. Of this number only 451,000 were to be found in what might be considered a rural setting, and among these extent and type of ruralness varied considerably. Although the number of students in rural schools is small compared with the number of students in Australia as a whole, a substantial amount of interest, support and debate revolves around the subject of rural education. This is probably due in part to a national pride in the outback and the romaticism associated with an admired independent life style. It also stems from the intensity of natural resource development now taking place in many rural regions of Australia and the practical problems this development gives rise to. There is, therefore, a disproportionately large amount of interest in the non-urban regions of Australia shown by urban dwellers.

In addition to a strong feeling of pride about outback life styles, rural education has received a boost in status in recent years because of widespread acceptance of the concept of equality of educational opportunity. Application of this concept in rural areas, however, requires extraordinary means. To assure that residents in remote and isolated areas have the same opportunity to learn as their urban counterparts, education schemes and resources yet to be identified will be required. The principle that underlies the character of the new centre, therefore, is derived from the concept that what we learn and the level of educational achievement to which we aspire should not be limited by the circumstances of birth or the geography of where we live.

This principle implies that educational services are apt to be more demanding on resources and they may be quite different in content and form than education services provided in cities. As pointed out

by Paul Nachtigal (1980, p.38), "Rural education might just look and operate differently... Rural children can receive a quality education designed specifically for their needs rather than a second rate program defined by urban standards...".[1] It is axiomatic to the centre's character, to paraphrase Wise (1972), that to offer students of different circumstances similar programmes of education may actually be treating them unequally.[2] But do lofty principles justify a new national research centre when times for such activities are lean? This remains to be seen, but if the potential of the centre lies in its ability to improve education among residents of rural Australia through a better understanding of the many factors that affect education opportunities of rural residents it appears to many to be worth the effort.

Suggesting that deficiencies in rural education exist is not to deny some impressive programmes in rural education that have already been achieved throughout the nation. Each state and the Northern Territory can point to past and present efforts that have achieved desirable results. But regardless of the positive things being done and favourable attitudes towards supporting efforts to solve rural problems, serious misgivings about standards in rural education are expressed at fairly regular intervals by a variety of interest groups. During a major national conference on rural education held in Perth in November, 1979, the extent to which these misgivings are based on actual conditions was frequently expressed. But in many cases protagonists for points of view on both sides of the various debates held during the conference had to concede that their views were more problematic than factual, simply because there is a dirth of reliable information on rural education. And, furthermore, that in some cases, the information that does exist is contraditory.

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1. Nachtigal, Paul, Improving Rural Schools, National Institute of Education, Washington D.C., 1980, 38.
2. Wise, Arthur, E., Rich Schools, Poor Schools, University of Chicago Press, 1972, 156.

The conference, New Directions in Rural Education, gave rise to several conclusions that give credence to the idea of establishing a new research centre on rural education. The conference summary, published by the Education Department of Western Australia (April, 1980), reported the following:

> There were frequent calls during the Conference for further research. It was made clear that key decisions in the rural educational arena will be made on the basis of a fragmented understanding of issues until such times as substantial studies of the problems areas are undertaken...
>
> The Conference also endorsed the importance of evaluating existing rural education projects...
>
> At present in Australia there seems to be no agency or authority which operates with a sufficiently broad charter that would enable it to draw together the understandings derived from a multiplicity of disciplines, such as demography, economics, government and sociology. It seems that important trends emerging from these disciplines are only incidentally monitored and taken into account when formulating education policy. Yet the Conference convincingly underlined the shortcomings of considering educational issues without reference to developments in other disciplines. Steps should be taken to diminish such myopic planning, though the difficulties of integrating such knowledge bases should not be underestimated...
>
> At present there is a limited data base for the development of rural education policies. The research that has been undertaken in the area has been diffuse in its focus and restricted in its scope... If research into the issues and problems surrounding rural schools is to have effect, then increasing support and co-ordination will be necessary...[3]

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3. Education Department of Western Australia, New Directions in Rural Education: A National Conference on Rural Education, Conference Report. Perth: Research Branch, Education Department of Western Australia, April, 1980, 53-56,62.

Among conferences on education in general, the Perth conference on rural education stands out. Several activities and policy considerations that grew out of the discussions and conclusions of the participants have been initiated or are being considered by various state governments. The National Centre for Research on Rural Education is one such development. The written proposal to the University of Western Australia and the Education Department of Western Australia which led to the creation of the Centre was inspired by the need to respond to shortcomings in rural education research identified during the conference. The need to make more favourable and comprehensive the opportunities for education among residents of rural Australia was frequently voiced by conference participants.

The Centre has been established with the broad view that 'rural' is a comprehensive non-specific term. Rural in this sense requires that work carried out at the Centre be among residents of country towns, farming and pastoral settlements, mining enterprises and Aboriginal communities. In its most comprehensive sense rural implies that the work carried out by Centre personnel can involve any aspect of education or related fields that may have effect on education in non-urban Australia, among any classification of rural residents regardless of their background and age. Likewise, the scope of the work done at the Centre should be broad and expansive. Cateogires of work may range from the specific and local in nature to policy analysis at the state or commonwealth levels leading to changes in the course of education as a whole. Work may be based on expressed need that has immediate practical application or it may be pure research not necessarily bearing upon an observed problem.

Pedagogical, economic, social, geographic, and demographic factors insofar as they bear on education in rural Australia, are the objects of the Centre's interests. Research carried out under such a broad charter might involve several categories of work. Centre research themes, therefore,might include:

(1) Examination and analysis of the consequences for education of demographic, social and economic conditions and trends in rural Australia.

(2) Development of policies and practices which capitalise on the perceived strengths of rural schools.

(3) Determination of the means whereby a closer relationship between school and community may be developed.

(4) Development of basic instructional strategies and curriculum materials identified as being appropriate to the rural Australian environment.

(5) Examination and analysis of policies and practices associated with the professional preparation and placement of teachers in rural schools.

(6) A review and analysis of policies and practices that regulate the organisation, governance and financing of education for rural regions of the various states and territories.

(7) Acquisition of a better understanding of the nature, potential for education and likely consequences of modern technology, especially satellite communication technology, on the delivery of education services in rural areas.

Any number of specific research topics may be identified from such an extensive list of themes. Work at the Centre presently is

involved in delineating specific research topics from these themes and assigning priorities to their eventual execution. Specific topics range, for example, from studies that will examine the provisions for educational services in mining settlements to exploration of problems associated with the design of special education programmes for physically and emotionally handicapped children in rural areas; from studies on educational problems of students in extreme isolation to acquisition of a better understanding of the nature and potential of satellite communications technology on the delivery of educational services in isolated areas.

In addition to doing research on major issues and problems in rural education which are identified as being of priority, the work of the Centre is expected to include several other activities that may lead to improved rural education. These include:

(1) Sponsorship of national, regional and local seminars, symposia and conferences on rural education.

(2) Development of a base from which a community of scholars, practitioners and lay people concerned for improved education in rural areas - - a cadre of like-minded people - - may co-operate, exchange ideas and generally associate with each other in furtherance of a common goal.

(3) Operation of a clearing house for gathering, cataloguing and disseminating information on rural conditions and education in Australia.

(4) Publication and dissemination of the results of research and other activities carried out at the Centre, or elsewhere, as widely as possible within Australia and overseas.

(5) Support of relevant in-service activities which are necessary for people directly involved in rural education or in the preparation of teachers for service in rural schools.

At present such a wide variety of activities and research themes is not commensurate with the resources of the Centre. The staff of the Centre consists of a director, a research fellow, one and one half research assistants, a secretary and a typist. In addition to the above staff members, other individuals may become affiliated with the Centre during the life of specific research projects carried out through special grants, commissions, or contracts. Also appointees of other institutions and agencies who have appropriate research interests are encouraged to take up residency at the Centre for set terms as visiting scholars or as seconded staff members.

Resources of the Centre are available for research students to undertake investigations in rural education which will form part of the thesis requirements for higher degrees or form a basis for post - doctoral programmes. Two Ph.D. Scholarships can be awarded this year.

Because of these limitations, the title 'National Centre' has been described by some as bordering on the audacious if not the pretentious, especially since the Centre has no federal sponsorship, was established on the initiative of people in one state only and has financial resources of no more than $153,000 annually. By comparison the

national Curriculum Development Centre has a staff of thirty-five full-time personnel and eight part-timers plus the services of personnel of other organisations bringing to eighty the total number of people working on CDC projects. And CDC's estimated budget for 1980-81 of $3.0 million has been described by its director as 'trivial' in view of the Centre's functions.[3]

Thus, the question must be asked, 'In what terms can NCRRE be defined as a national centre?' National in a title suggests broad based resources and scope as well as the possibility of a federal charter. Of these NCRRE has only broad scope. However, it does have de facto, if not de jure, licence to study issues that have national significance. Studies need not be carried out nationwide, that is, they need not be undertaken in all quarters of the nation simultaneously to have national significance. And, Western Australia, as a base of operations affords a rich, near limitless combination of rural conditions under which studies may be undertaken. Also lending credence to the 'nationalness' of the Centre is the Centre's Board of Management. Although the Centre itself is small, it derives authority from a Board of Management with members drawn from a broad cross section of national interests and locales. The current Chairman of the Board is Dr. David Mossenson, Director General of Education in Western Australia.[4]

Although the Board of Management gives the Centre policy direction, Centre personnel are staff members of the Department of Education of the University of Western Australia and the director reports to the Head of Department. Because the Centre is under the aegis of a Boar

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3. Connors, Lyndsay, 'The Curriculum Development Centre', Education News 17 3 : 1980, 18.

4. Other Members: M.J. Angus, Assistant Director (Research), Education Department of Western Australia; I. Birch, Head, Department of Education, University of Western Australia; S. Broad, National Vice-President, Isolated Children's Parents Association;S.S. Dunn, Chairman, Education Research and Development Committee, Canberra; D. Fischer, Chairman of Commissioners, Rural and Industries Bank of Western Australia; W. Hamilton, Deputy Director of Education, Queensland; J. Kelly, Division of Education and Research, the Ford Foundation, New York; J. Nestor, Chairman, Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia; W. Stern, Professor of Agronomy, University of Western Australia; P. Tannock, Chairman, Schools Commission, Canberra.

of management with nationwide representation while simultaneously functioning as a typical university research unit it has a dichotomous constitutional structure. This provision is seen as a means by which the Centre will be able to develop a positive relationship across a wide cross-section of the Australian population. The Board is seen as giving the Centre national credibility; the University's Department of Education as giving it academic credibility.

It is too early in the life of the Centre to forecast how the Centre's character will eventually take form. And the need for the Centre to come into existence notwithstanding, it comes upon the scene at an austere time in the history of education research and development. Furthermore, its initial lease on life is only three years. However, it must be taken as a positive development that the Centre exists at all. Certainly the Centre has been enthusiastically endorsed from many quarters, and enjoys a high level of professional, institutional and political support. This is an asset. But it is a qualified asset, for it has also engendered high levels of expectation. The potential of the Centre and what may be expected of it in the way of immediate results should be tempered with the reality of its limitations as well as its assets. Favourably regarded or not, it must be kept in mind that unless groups trying to bring about improvements in education have the technical resources and sufficient competent personnel for carrying out their purposes, those purposes cannot be achieved, irrespective of their logic, legitimacy or intensity.

Rural education may or may not be a more difficult subject to do research on than education in general. But only through research done thoroughly on rural education will the reality of rural problems be revealed. It is important that education received by rural residents corresponds to their interests, norms and values. But those responsible for providing education in rural areas have first to discover what these interests, norms and values are. This will require resources, perseverance and patience. If the Centre is to achieve national status it will have to come up with findings that merit national consideration. Such developments can not be legislated; they must be inspired. As NCRRE makes its first probes into the field, it is hoped that rural education will become an arena for many more inspired education researchers and that innovative educational programmes required by rural residents will be introduced.